

Short Research Article

Second Language Writing Tasks: The Gains of the Cognitive-Mentalist Error Analysis in Essay Writings

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Received: March 4, 2019

Accepted: March 10, 2019

Online Published: April 1, 2019

doi:10.22158/selt.v7n2p135

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v7n2p135>**Abstract**

Writing is a skill, which demands that students plan and organize their imagination clearly and in sequential order to fulfill the essence of writing which is communicative. Teaching the writing skill is more difficult than teaching and practicing other language skills because of its generative tendency. It is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate the control of a number of variables simultaneously and intelligently to achieve the communicative goal. By implication, it means the writer must plan the content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and formation of ideas. Successful writing is an end product of intelligent reasoning and good planning.

It is from the complexity platform above that one can rightly view the audacious task of students of English as a Second Language (ESL) extraction. The interference from the First Language (FL) or Mother Tongue (MT) is inevitable at this trying stage. Interaction goes on globally and there is the need to be able to interact verbally and in the written form acceptably. The approach offers in the Cognitive Mentalist submission is the focus of this paper. The students are expected to express their views, imagination, experience and observations freely unmindful of errors. This approach is primarily expressive and laden with errors of the writers. The searchlight is therefore beamed on how the analysis of errors committed can be of benefits to both the ESL learner and teacher.

Keywords

Error Analysis, Behaviorist, Mentalist, Cognitivist, Free Expression, Interference

1. Introduction

In Nigeria as a multilingual nation, English is a Second Language and it is not uncommon to find both the oral and written communications of the students displaying interference errors. Okedara and Odeh (2002) opined that over the years the problem of poor writing skill has persisted and that this reveals

that the conventional method of teaching writing is ineffective. Hence, the different views and opinions on the nature of writing make investigation into ways of developing the writing skill inevitable and in fact, it is quite essential.

Akinwamide (2014) says the generative nature of writing and the need to employ writing as a communicative vehicle that conveys writers messages in a logical and coherent manner demands that it should be well taught. Coupled with this is the fact that writing is different from the other language skills of reading, speaking and listening. All the other macro-skills of language are taught without serious concern on how to coordinate ideas, thoughts and the application of the mechanics as it is required in writing skill.

Going by its nature and demands, writing is often a solo affair, embark upon with deep, rapt attention, involving the pschomotor, cognitive and affective domains and taking a deal of time. It is not unlikely, this may make it less inviting to learners and teachers as a classroom activity. This perhaps explains why some teachers gloss over this skill in Nigerian schools and only examinations force both teachers and students to it. Writing as a language skill is packaged with linguistic, psychological and cognitive constraints which require the full attention of the writer before acceptable delivery can be accomplished. Continuous Writing in L1 could be laden with error let alone writing in a Foreign Language. An average Nigerian student is conscious of the possibility of mixing American with British English spellings, the interference with the M.T. is there and not far from his or her table is a spelling checker in order to satisfy the requirement of acceptable write up.

The language teacher is not left off the hook of the array of demands of good writing. A considerable amount of time is expended on the Mechanics of writing, Logical Organisation, addressing errors of Irrelevance Content and Ambiguity of Expression of students' writings in a Second Language. The teachers as well as the students spend a lot of time in fulfilling the requirements of good writing. Teachers' task is also often aggravated by the objective of developing in students the sub-skills of writing and so correction at this level is paramount apart from the overall level of communicative competence expected.

There are many varied views about the learning and teaching of languages. These views came up based on developments in the fields of psychology and linguistics. The theories have pedagogical influence on language learning. Stemming from the theories, language teaching and learning are considered based on the premises of various approaches, methods and techniques to the accomplishments of the inherent theoretical or philosophical goals. The language classroom is the workshop for test running of the philosophical approaches leading to the accomplishment of the underlining goals.

2. The Philosophical Background to the Cognitive-Mentalist View

The Cognitive-Mentalists stand in opposition to the earlier traditional habit formation of the Behaviorism School of Thought. The Mentalists are concerned with the need to focus attention on what goes on as the innate ideas of the learners. They developed a cognitive approach that pays attention on the mental

processes rather than the observable behavior. Central to the cognitivist ideology is the idea that knowledge is made up of symbolic mental representations, such as propositions and images which are inborn, together with a mechanism that operates on those representations. Knowledge is seen as something that is constantly constructed by learners based on their existing cognitive structures. Learning is relative to the stage of cognitive development in each learner and understanding the learner's existing intellectual capability is central to understanding the learning process. Therefore, from a psychological point of view, essay writing should be a psychological impulse, an output from emotional vent, flowing out of personal life experience, observations and the individual true accounts of issues. The perception and description from individuals' knowledge and experience cannot be the same. Independent writing should be a display of students' views of life, to express their inner feelings and put in graphical forms their own spice of life. Errors are welcome as a result of freedom to express personal ideas. The cognitive writer is communicating feelings, experience and observations. Accuracy of forms and styles are secondary to communication. The attempt to build up the writing skill through mere studying of the work of others as proposed by the model approach may not reveal the true mood nor favor the generating of ideas as the Cognitive advocates. The danger is that students may perceive writing as a mechanical practice and nothing more than producing correct sentences. Though controlled tasks of the model approach could help students to develop accuracy and correctness by engaging in various exercises based on imitation; nevertheless, when students are to compose using their own sentences without a given model, the students end up with many errors.

Table 1. The Justification for the Cognitive-Mentalist Pedagogy

Psychological Theory	→	Cognitive(Mentalist)
↓		↓
Grammatical School of Thought	→	Expressive
↓		↓
Language Approach	→	Process
↓		↓
Classroom Method	→	Free Expression
↓		↓
Techniques	→	{ Individual writing with Peer/Teacher Editing Group writing „ „ „ Collaborative writing „ „ „
Inherent Goals		Confidence in Writing Originality „ „ Creativity

In the above table, the build-ups to the inherent goals are imperative to the conclusion of this paper. The Mentalists believe in giving vent to the writers' imagination irrespective of language proficiency and writing skill dexterity of the writers. Mentalists expect error laden products from the writers but turn around to edit and analyse for the following reasons;

- a. Identification of students' areas of deficiency
- b. Identifying the topic to be addressed by the teacher based on observable learners' deficiency
- c. Serving as evaluating mechanism in determining the progress of language learning
- d. Displaying the knowledge polarity among the learners and
- e. Pointing to suitability or inadequacy of the classroom method

The mastery of all the technicalities inherent in being a good writer and the concatenating of writing skill variables are not and cannot be mastered by imitating model writers. This explains the theoretical views of the Cognitive-Mentalists.

Table 2. Mentalists Analytical Pedagogy for Writing Skill Development

Writing Variables	Focus	Manipulating Tools
Content Relevance	Appropriateness	Pre writing Techniques
Facts Arrangement	Logicity/Sequential	Peer Reviewing
Grammaticality	Suitability, Correctness & Meaningfulness	Grammar Rules
Writing Mechanics	Adherence to rules	Grammar Rules

Analysis of the cognitive-mentalist pedagogy opens a four-way-approach to a single write-up. The language teacher considers the relevance of the entire write-up with the subject matter. Here, the message of communication is considered for the intended audience. The next level is the presentation of issues in sequential order to enhance comprehension by the audience. This is followed by critical observation of adherence to grammatical rules in a given write-up. Error at this level is expected and addressed by the teacher and peers through recursive editing. The last level addresses the mechanics of language use. Lapses are rectified by peers reviewing by subjecting write-ups to the test of grammatical rules.

3. ESL Teachers' Interventions

The language teachers therefore optimize the gains of the Cognitive Mentalists by supporting learners with the following interventions.

- a. Learners are engaged in writing tasks that are invariably didactic. Writing tasks that embrace development in other language sub-skills.
- b. Facilitating avenues where learners' in competencies are displayed and teachers and learners edit for correctness and progress.

- c. Ensuring interactions with other learners for communicative writing skill development which course books may not overtly achieve.
- d. Specifically giving tasks where Mechanics and Expressions are considered.

4. Implications

The pedagogical pursuit of the Cognitive-Mentalists has a rewarding implication for learners of ESL extraction. In a way, the process is displaying a novel demonstration of skills integration. Communicative writing is enhanced when we integrate writing with other sub-skills and communicative activities, giving it more relevance and importance and also making it more interesting with peer reviewing inclusion. We need to use meaningful, realistic and relevant writing tasks, based on our learners' needs and interests (we know the learners' need through error analysis). We may need to design individual tasks based on what individual learners need to write in furtherance of Language Learning.

It is when teachers and learners work to differentiate between "writing to learn" (incorporating other things, like spelling, structure, syntactic rules and semantic choice of words), and "learning to write" (limited scope) that the communicative purpose of writing according to the Cognitive-Mentalists can be accomplished.

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